The Church of All Worlds

A Brief History

It all began on April 7, 1962, when, after reading Stranger in a Strange Land, Tim Zell and Lance Christie shared water and formed a water-brotherhood called "Atl" at Westminster College at Fulton, Missouri. During the mid-1960s the group was centered on the University of Oklahoma campus at Norman under the name Atlan Foundation. A periodical, The Atlan Torch (later The Atlan Annals), was published from 1962-1968. Following a move to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1968 the Church of All Worlds was legally incorporated. In March of that year, the first issue of Green Egg appeared and over the years made Tim Zell, its editor, a major force in Neo-Paganism, a term which Zell coined. CAW was the first Neo-Pagan/Earth Religion to obtain full federal recognition, although it was initially refused recognition by the Missouri Department of Revenue on the basis of its lack of primary concern about the hereafter, God, the destiny of souls, heaven, hell, sin and its punishment, and other supernatural matters. The ruling was overturned as unconstitutional in 1971. The Church of All Worlds took much inspiration from the science fiction classic, Stranger in a Strange Land by Robert Heinlein. In the novel, Valentine Michael Smith was a human being born on Mars and raised by Martians. Upon being brought to Earth, he established the Church of All Worlds, built around "nests", a combination of a congregations and an intentional communities. A basic concept was "grokking", i.e., the ability to be fully empathic. Heinlein's CAW emphasized non-possessive love and joyous expression of sexuality as divine union. Their greeting was "Thou art God" or "Thou art Goddess", a recognition of immanent divinity in each person. The basic theology of the CAW is a pantheism focused on immanent rather than transcendent divinity, which is worshipped in female as well as a male form.

The most important theological statement came in revelatory writings by Zell in 1970-73, on a theory which later came to be known as the Gaia Thesis, a biological validation of the ancient intuition that the planet is a single living organism, Mother Earth. Pantheists hold as divine the living spirit of Nature. Thus the CAW recognizes Mother Earth, the Horned God, the Green Man and other spirits of animistic totemism as the Divine Pantheon. Church of All Worlds was an early forerunner of the Deep Ecology movement. Through its focus on Mother Nature as Goddess and its recognition and ordination of women as Priestesses, CAW can also rightly be held to be the first Eco-Feminist Church. Its only creed states: "The Church of All Worlds is dedicated to the celebration of life, the maximal actualization of human potential and the realization of ultimate individual freedom and personal responsibility in harmonious eco-psychic relationship with the total Biosphere of Holy Mother Earth."

In 1974, CAW reported nests in Missouri, California, Illinois, Kansas, Wisconsin, Iowa, Wyoming, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, New Jersey, New York, and Ohio. It was then publishing two periodicals, Green Egg and The Pagan. Two years later Zell moved to Oregon with his new wife, Morning Glory, an ordained Priestess, for a rural life of writing, research and the practice of the religion he had developed. They left the administration of the CAW and the publication of the Green Egg in the hands of other Church leaders. After only a few more issues, the magazine ceased publication. Subsequently many Church Nests dissolved due to internal conflicts.

By the mid-1980s CAW survived only in California, focused around the sanctuary land bequeathed to the Church by its Bard, Gwydion Pendderwen. On and around this rural retreat, a Pagan homesteading community grew which included the Zells (Tim Zell had changed his first name to Otter in 1979 following a vision quest) and other long-time Church members who had moved to California, as well as many new people. Two new clergy were ordained during that time, Orion Stormcrow (a Church member since 1969) and Anodea Judith. (In 1991, Deborah Hamouris was ordained, bringing the present number of active clergy to six.) In the late 1980s, following Otter and Morning Glory's emergence from eight years of living in the wilderness, the Church of All Worlds began reorganizing under the leadership of Anodea Judith. The membership program was radically upgraded to include a Progressive Involvement Program (PIP), intensive training courses and a new members newsletter, The Scarlet Flame. Activities and membership increased dramatically during this period as CAW emerged from its slumber. The first issue of Green Egg (The Next Generation!) appeared in May, 1988, the 20th anniversary of its original publication. It has risen to a position of prominence among Pagan periodicals. Diane Darling, who joined the Church in the mid-'80s, is its editrix, Otter its publisher and designer. In 1991, with 52 pages and a four-color glossy cover, Green Egg won the Silver Award from the Wiccan/Pagan Press Alliance (WPPA) for "Most Professionally Formatted Pagan Publication". In 1992 Green Egg won the WPPA Gold Award for "Readers' Choice" as well as the Dragonfest Awards for "Most Attractive Format" and "Best Graphics". Diane won the Pentacle Award for "Favorite Pagan Editrix", and Otter for "Favorite Pagan Writer".

The non-fictional Church of All Worlds has grown far beyond Heinlein's dream. There are nine concentric circles of member involvement, named after the planets and grouped into three rings. Each circle's activity includes study, writings, magical training, sensitivity and encounter-group experience, as well as active participation in the life of the Church. The First Ring, Circles 1, 2, and 3, is for Seekers, those who are only participants. Second Ring, Circles 4 through 6, is made up of Scions, members who help run the church. The clergy, Council of the Third Ring, consists of legally ordained priests and priestesses; longtime members who have worked through the other circles, undergone personal and leadership development, religious training, and completed the Church's ordination requirements. There are two governing bodies in addition to the Clergy: the Board of Directors, which determines policy and business matters, and the Fun Committee, which implements the activities and functions of the Church. The Fun Committee is made up of a Board member, a clergy member, and one representative from each of the church functions, such as Rites and Festivals, Publications, Membership, Communications and each subsidiary. There is an annual General Meeting to elect officers and make changes in the Church's ever-evolving Bylaws. Worship involves attending weekly or monthly Nest meetings usually held in the homes of Nest members. Autonomous nests are composed of at least three members of 2nd Circle meeting monthly or more often. The basic liturgical form is based on a circle where a chalice of water is shared around as part of the ritual part of the Nest meeting. Longer events are celebrated at the Church sanctuary, Annwfn, a 55-acres of land in northern California. Annwfn has a two-story temple, cabins, garden, orchard and a small pond. It is maintained by a small community of resident caretakers. In addition to the eight Celtic seasonal festivals, the Church holds handfastings (marriages), vision quests, initiations, workshops, retreats, work parties and meetings on the land. As of 1993, the Church has ten chartered nests in California, with others in Florida, Illinois, Arizona, Maryland, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Australia (where CAW has become the first legally-incorporated Pagan church in that country). A number of proto-Nests are in the process of forming. Current President is priest Tom Williams (a member since 1968). Otter is presently engaged in the formation of the Universal Federation of Pagans (UFP), a worldwide association with which he hopes to unify the global Pagan community. 1992 was the 30th anniversary of the Church. A Grand Convocation was held in August, with an attendance of nearly 300. Membership at the end of 1993 was around 600.

The Mission Statement of the Church of All Worlds is as follows:

The mission of the Church of All Worlds is to evolve a network of information, mythology, and experience that provides a context and stimulus for reawakening Gaea, and reuniting Her children through tribal community dedicated to responsible stewardship and the general evolution of consciousness. Over the years, the Church of All Worlds has chartered a number of subsidiary branches through which it practices and teaches its religion:

- Forever Forests : Box 212, Redwood Valley, CA 95470. Founded in 1977 by Gwydion Pendderwen; the ecology branch. Sponsors tree-planting events and rituals.
- Lifeways : 2140 Shattuck #2093, Berkeley, CA 94704. Founded in 1983 by Anodea Judith; the teaching branch. Offers workshops, classes, healing rituals, recovery programs, wilderness excursions, and training for the priesthood. Handles the Progressive Involvement Program.
- Nemeton : Box 610, Laytonville, CA 95454. Founded in 1972 by Gwydion Pennderwen and Alison Harlow; the marketing branch. Tapes and CDs, songbooks, T-shirts, philosophical tracts and books. Catalog available.
- Ecosophical Research Assn. (ERA) : Box 982, Ukiah, CA 95482. Founded in 1977 by Morning Glory Zell; devoted to research and exploration in the fields of history, mythology and natural sciences. Produced the Living Unicorn, the New Guinea Mermaid expedition and a Peruvian Pilgrimage.
- Holy Order of Mother Earth (HOME) : Box 212, Redwood Valley, CA 95470 Founded in 1977 by the Zells and Alison Harlow; magical and shamanic branch open only to trained initiates. Creates and conducts the Church's rituals and ceremonies.* Peaceful Order of the Earth Mother (POEM) : Box 5227, Clearlake, CA 95422. Founded in 1988 by Willowoak Istarwood; dedicated to children and child nurturing. Provides enriching activities for children at gatherings, summer camps and a quarterly magazine for Pagan youth, How About Magic? (HAM) :$7 per year.
- Green Egg : Box 1542, Ukiah, CA 95482. Award-winning quarterly journal of the New Paganism and the Gaian Renaissance, founded in 1968 by Otter Zell. Sample $6; subscription $15/yr US bulk mail; $21/yr US/Canada 1st class/envelope; $27/yr trans-Atlantic; $30/yr trans-Pacific.
- Annwfn : Box 48, Calpella, CA 95418. CAW's 55-acre land sanctuary and retreat in the Misty Mountains of Mendonesia. Write for Visitor's Policy.
- CAW Membership and General Correspondence :

(Australian Headquarters) PO Box 408, Woden, ACT 2606.

References:

Further information on the Church of All Worlds may be found in the following books:

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- Melton, J. Gordon, The Encyclopedia of American Religions, from the Institute for the Study of American Religions, POB 90709, Santa Barbara, CA 93190 1979 (3rd edition, 1988); The Essential New Age, 1990.

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